



Finglass, P. J. (2017). Sophocles' Ajax and the polis. *Polis*, 34(2), 306-317. <https://doi.org/10.1163/20512996-12340129>

Peer reviewed version

License (if available):  
Other

Link to published version (if available):  
[10.1163/20512996-12340129](https://doi.org/10.1163/20512996-12340129)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)  
PDF-document

This is the accepted author manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Brill at <https://doi.org/10.1163/20512996-12340129> . Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

## University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

### General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:  
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

# SOPHOCLES' *AJAX* AND THE POLIS

P. J. Finglass

Abstract: This article examines the two mentions of the polis in Sophocles' *Ajax*, arguing that to understand the political aspects of this and other tragedies, we need to take into account the diverse composition of their audiences.

Keywords: Sophocles, Ajax, politics, Athens, audience, diversity

In my edition of Sophocles' *Ajax* the discussion of 'politics' in the introduction is only a couple of paragraphs long.<sup>1</sup> The invitation to contribute to this volume gives me a chance to say slightly more about this topic, as well as briefly to consider an important paper that appeared after the publication of that book.<sup>2</sup>

The two passages in the play that refer explicitly to the polis are as good a place as any to begin. This is the first:<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> P. J. Finglass, *Sophocles. Ajax*. Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries 48 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 57–9.

<sup>2</sup> For the place of the polis in Sophocles' *Electra* see P. J. Finglass, 'Is there a *polis* in Sophocles' *Electra*?', *Phoenix*, 59 (2005), pp. 199–209; for a recent book-length discussion of the relationship between tragedy and politics see D. M. Carter (ed.), *Why Athens? A Reappraisal of Tragic Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), which refers to earlier literature.

<sup>3</sup> Text and translation, as throughout, are taken from Finglass, *Ajax*; I omit lines 854–8 as an interpolation. Further discussion of the passages that I cite, including relevant secondary literature, can be found in my commentary *ad loc.*

οὐ δ', ὦ τὸν αἰπὺν οὐρανὸν διφρηλατῶν	845
Ἥλιε, πατρώαν τὴν ἐμὴν ὅταν χθόνα ἴδῃς, ἐπισχῶν χρυσόνωτον ἡνίαν ἄγγελον ἄτας τὰς ἐμὰς μόρον τ' ἐμὸν γέροντι πατρὶ τῇ τε δυστήνῳ τροφῷ. ἣ που τάλαινα, τήνδ' ὅταν κλύῃ φάτιν,	850
ἥσει μέγαν κωκυτὸν ἐν πάσῃ πόλῃ. ἀλλ' οὐδὲν ἔργον ταῦτα θρηνεῖσθαι μάτην· ἀλλ' ἀρκτέον τὸ πρᾶγμα σὺν τάχει τινί.	853
ὦ φέγγος, ὦ γῆς ἱερὸν οἰκείας πέδον	859
Σαλαμῖνος, ὦ πατρῶον ἐστίας βάθρον,	860
κλειναί τ' Ἀθῆναι, καὶ τὸ σύντροφον γένος, κρήναί τε ποταμοί θ' οἶδε, καὶ τὰ Τρωικὰ πεδία προσαιδῶ, χαίρετ', ὦ τροφῆς ἐμοί· τοῦθ' ὕμιν Αἴας τοῦπος ὕστατον θροεῖ, τὰ δ' ἄλλ' ἐν Αἴδου τοῖς κάτω μυθήσομαι.	865

And you, who drive your chariot through the lofty heaven, the Sun, when you catch sight of my ancestral land, check your golden rein and announce my ruin and my death to my aged father and the wretched woman who nursed me. Wretched woman, I suppose that when she hears this message, she will raise a great lamentation in the whole city. But there is no point in vainly lamenting thus: no, the deed must be begun with speed. O light, o holy ground of my native land of Salamis, o ancestral foundation of my hearth, and famous Athens, and your race kindred to mine, and springs and rivers here, and the Trojan plains I address: farewell, you who have nourished me. This is the last word that Ajax pronounces to you; the rest I shall speak to those below in Hades.

These words are delivered by Ajax just seconds before his death. Even at this time of his greatest isolation, when he stands alone on a bare stage with no person or prop to

give him company,<sup>4</sup> his focus is not simply on himself and his own feelings. Rather, he imagines the impact of his death on his mother, and briefly but poignantly describes the lamentation that she will stir up across the city. Ajax's literal and figurative loneliness is frequently alluded to in scholarship on the play, yet here, in these moving words, Ajax recognises that his passing will have emotional consequences for others, including people from outside his immediate family – the people of the polis that he left behind so long ago. This imaginative sympathy in turn renders Ajax a more sympathetic character at this moment of his passing.

At the same time, Ajax's consideration for his mother and the people of his home city makes conspicuous the absence of any corresponding concern for the people around him at Troy, people who will be bereft and defenceless thanks to his suicide: Tecmessa, Eurysaces, and his soldiers as represented by the chorus. And as is evident from the extract above, the mention of the polis is brief. Immediately afterwards Ajax as it were acknowledges that his thoughts have strayed too far from the task in hand, and enters the skene building to throw himself on his sword – though not before invoking the Sun, Salamis, Athens and its people, and the land of Troy. The reference to three different towns in Ajax's closing words further emphasises his awareness of his ties to other people and of responsibilities that go beyond the question of his personal honour (something not mentioned in this speech). Yet the culminating reference to Troy focuses not on the Trojans themselves but on their territory, specifically their springs, rivers, and plains, which he would have encountered during the fighting, rather than the Trojans as a people or Troy as a

---

<sup>4</sup> For a justification of this staging see P. J. Finglass, 'Second thoughts on the sword', in G. W. Most and L. Ozbek (eds.), *Staging Ajax's Suicide*. Seminari e convegni 42 (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2015), pp. 193–210, which modifies and expands upon Finglass, *Ajax*, pp. 376–9.

political unit. The nourishment that he derived from the poleis of Salamis and Athens (cf. *χαίρετ', ὦ τροφῆς ἐμοί*) belongs to an earlier period of his life; at Troy, he has only the landscape to sustain him. These references to poleis may thus serve to emphasise, not mitigate, Ajax's isolation.

The second passage which mentions the polis needs to be quoted at greater length:

#### MENEΛΑΟΣ

	οὗτος, σὲ φωνῶ τόνδε τὸν νεκρὸν χεροῖν μὴ συγκομίζειν, ἀλλ' ἔαν ὅπως ἔχει.	
Τευ.	τίνος χάριν τοσόνδ' ἀνήλωσας λόγον;	
Με.	δοκοῦντ' ἐμοί, δοκοῦντα δ' ὅς κραίνει στρατοῦ.	1050
Τευ.	οὔκουν ἂν εἴποις ἦντιν' αἰτίαν προθείς;	
Με.	ὀθούνεκ' αὐτὸν ἐλπίσαντες οἴκοθεν ἄγειν Ἀχαιοῖς ξύμμαχόν τε καὶ φίλον, ἐξηύρομεν ξυνόντες ἐχθίῳ Φρυγῶν· ὅστις στρατῷ ξύμπαντι βουλευσας φόνον	1055
	νύκτωρ ἐπεστράτευσεν, ὥς ἔλοι δορί· κεῖ μὴ θεῶν τις τήνδε πείραν ἔσβεσεν, ἡμεῖς μὲν ἂν τήνδ' ἦν ὅδ' εἴληχεν τύχην θανόντες ἂν προὔκειμεθ' αἰσχίστῳ μόρῳ, οὗτος δ' ἂν ἔζη. νῦν δ' ἐνήλλαξεν θεός.	1060
	ὦν οὔνεκ' αὐτὸν οὔτις ἔστ' ἀνὴρ σθένων	1062
	τοσοῦτον ὥστε σῶμα τυμβεῦσαι τάφῳ, ἀλλ' ἀμφὶ χλωρὰν ψάμαθον ἐκβεβλημένος ὄρνισι φορβὴ παραλίοις γενήσεται.	1065
	πρὸς ταῦτα μηδὲν δεινὸν ἐξάρης μένος. εἰ γὰρ βλέποντος μὴ ἴδυνήθημεν κρατεῖν, πάντως θανόντος γ' ἄρξομεν, κἂν μὴ θέλῃς, χερσὶν παρευθύνοντες. οὐ γὰρ ἔσθ' ὅπου λόγων γ' ἀκοῦσαι ζῶν ποτ' ἠθέλησ' ἐμῶν.	1070
	καίτοι κακοῦ πρὸς ἀνδρὸς ἀνδρα δημότην μηδὲν δικαιοῦν τῶν ἐφεστῶτων κλύειν. οὐ γὰρ ποτ' οὔτ' ἂν ἐν πόλῃ νόμοι καλῶς φέροιנט' ἂν, ἔνθα μὴ καθεστήκοι δέος, οὔτ' ἂν στρατός γε σωφρόνως ἄρχοιτ' ἔτι,	1075

μηδὲν φόβου πρόβλημα μηδ' αἰδοῦς ἔχων.  
 ἀλλ' ἄνδρα χρή, κἄν σῶμα γεννήσῃ μέγα,  
 δοκεῖν πεσεῖν ἂν κἄν ἀπὸ μικροῦ κακοῦ.  
 δέος γὰρ ὧ πρόσεστιν αἰσχύνῃ θ' ὁμοῦ,  
 σωτηρίαν ἔχοντα τόνδ' ἐπίστασο· 1080

ὅπου δ' ὑβρίζειν δρᾷν θ' ἃ βούλεται παρῇ,  
 ταύτην νόμιζε τὴν πόλιν χρόνῳ ποτὲ  
 ἐξ οὐρίων δραμοῦσαν εἰς βυθὸν πεσεῖν.  
 ἀλλ' ἐστάτω μοι καὶ δέος τι καίριον,  
 καὶ μὴ δοκῶμεν δρῶντες ἂν ἡδώμεθα 1085

οὐκ ἀντιτείσειν αὖθις ἂν λυποίμεθα.  
 ἔρπει παραλλάξ ταῦτα. πρόσθεν οὔτος ἦν  
 αἰθῶν ὑβριστής, νῦν δ' ἐγὼ μέγ' αὖ φρονῶ.  
 καὶ σοι προφωνῶ τόνδε μὴ θάπτειν, ὅπως  
 μὴ τόνδε θάπτων αὐτὸς εἰς ταφὰς πέσῃς. 1090

[Menelaus] You there, I tell you not to join in moving this corpse with your hands, but to leave it as it is.

[Teucer] For what purpose have you wasted your breath in such a proud speech?

[Menelaus] That speech is my resolution, and the resolution of the ruler of the army.

[Teucer] Won't you say what reason you're putting forward?

[Menelaus] Because, after hoping that we were bringing him from home as an ally and friend for the Achaeans, we found in our dealings with him that he was a worse enemy than the Phrygians. This was the man who plotted death for the whole army and made war against them by night, to kill them with the spear. And if one of the gods had not quenched his attempt, we would have perished by the fortune which is his lot, and be lying in a most miserable death, while this man would be alive. But as it is, a god has changed it round. For that reason there is no man strong enough to bury the body in a tomb. But cast out somewhere on the yellow sand, he will become food for the birds of the shore. In view of this, do not rouse your grim wrath. For if we couldn't control him alive, at least we'll master him dead, even if you're against it, controlling him in our hands. As for my words, he never wanted to listen to them when he was alive. And yet it is the mark of a bad man when a commoner does

not deign to listen to the authorities. For the laws could never function properly in a city where fear is not firmly established, nor, for that matter, could an army be ruled with due consideration without the protection afforded by fear and restraint. But a man, even if he grows an enormous frame, must expect to fall through even a small affliction. For when fear and respect together attend a man, know that he possesses security. But when a man can indulge in wanton violence and do as he likes, be assured that this city, though previously sped by favouring breezes, in time will fall to the depths. No, let me have established a proper sense of fear, and let us not think that we can act according to our pleasure and not then in turn pay a penalty which causes us pain. These things go by turns. Before this man was blazing in his insolence, but now it is I who think big. And I warn you not to bury this man, in case while burying him you yourself fall into the grave.

Menelaus' words, spoken immediately after his entry to forbid the burial of the slain warrior, provide a more sustained engagement with the idea of the polis than we found in Ajax's suicide speech. Whereas the polis for Ajax was something distant in space and time as he stood there on that lonely stage, in Menelaus' view it forms an effective comparison for the type of society that he envisages among the Greek army at Troy – one that depends on fear for its preservation. Menelaus' world view, at best an idiosyncratic account of what a polis ought to be, is supposed to justify both his criticism of Ajax's behaviour and his absolute refusal to countenance any resistance on Teucer's part to his commands.

Just as in Sophocles' *Antigone*, where Creon's repeatedly stated belief in authoritarian governance characterises him as foolish, so too Menelaus' words mark him out as intensely unsympathetic. Despite all the faults of Ajax's character, the audience's sympathies are directed away from his antagonist and towards the dead man. Obedience in certain contexts is self-evidently an essential part of the life of

both an army and a city; but Menelaus' concern for this value is troublingly excessive, even to the extent of taking an obvious pleasure in his ability to control Ajax after his death as he had never managed to in life. He openly boasts about 'thinking big', a phrase elsewhere found in negative commands warning people against adopting such a dangerous state of mind, not proudly predicated by a speaker of his own action. And he shows no human sympathy either for his fallen foe or for his half-brother, crouched over the corpse in obvious distress. He does all this even though Ajax's night-time attack on the Greek camp provided him with a justification of a sort for forbidding his burial (although many, perhaps most, of the audience would have disputed even that) – rather than focusing on that argument, by far his strongest, he allows himself to be diverted into the unlovely authoritarianism that makes up the majority of his speech.

Such sentiments would set him at odds with the values of the members of an Athenian democratic audience, who would have been used to making up their own minds and freely expressing their views as they did so, not cowed by some authority that they had to follow without question. Greater obedience is naturally expected in a military context, yet even the generals who gave Athenians orders in war were annually elected by the Assembly, and thus ultimately owed their power to the troops that they commanded. And effective generals know how to inspire their men rather than simply order them to do their will.

On the other hand, it is not just democratic Athenians who would have been outraged by Menelaus' nostrums. It is hard to imagine that any passing Corinthians, or Megarians, or Chians, or Samothracians who happened to be in the audience would have taken more kindly to the idea of a society based completely on fear, especially when that idea is advocated by an obviously odious character. The Dionysia at Athens, the most prestigious tragic competition and most likely venue for the first



performance of *Ajax*, would have attracted many visitors from overseas to watch the spectacle, something perhaps on a greater scale than anything on offer elsewhere in the Greek world. By contrast the Lenaea, which was held before the sailing season, would not have seen such a diverse audience, as Dikaiopolis points out in Aristophanes' *Acharnians* of 425 BC;<sup>5</sup> nor would the Rural Dionysia, since deme theatres would not have enticed other Greeks in the way that a festival held at Athens itself would. But even there it would be overconfident to rule out the possibility of any non-Athenian attending. At any festival in Attica, non-Athenians were undoubtedly in a minority, yet that is no reason to ignore their possible reactions; their thoughts, their feelings, as far as we can reconstruct or speculate about them, deserve our attention every bit as much as those of the Athenian majority.

Some of these non-Athenians would come from non-democratic societies, with no tradition of electing generals or collective decision-making. But it does not follow that they would have been enthusiastic about the kind of authoritarianism put forward by Menelaus. Even any passing Spartans may have thought that he was going too far. It is possible, as Gottfried Hermann suggested two centuries ago, that Menelaus' words are meant to characterise him, at least in the eyes of the Athenians in the audience, as a typical Spartan, obsessed with order and control.<sup>6</sup> But Spartans themselves will have taken a more positive view of their ideology, and are unlikely to

---

<sup>5</sup> Lines 502–7: οὐ γάρ με νῦν γε διαβαλεῖ Κλέων ὅτι | ξένων παρόντων τὴν πόλιν κακῶς λέγω. | αὐτοὶ γάρ ἐσμεν οὐπὶ Ληναίῳ τ' ἀγῶν, | κοῦπω ξένοι πάρεισιν· οὔτε γὰρ φόροι | ἤκουσιν οὔτ' ἐκ τῶν πόλεων οἱ ξύμμαχοι· | ἀλλ' ἐσμέν αὐτοὶ νῦν γε περιεπτισμένοι. For the whole issue see D. W. Roselli, *Theater of the People. Spectators and Society in Ancient Athens* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), pp. 118–57.

<sup>6</sup> G. Hermann, *Sophoclis Ajax* (Leipzig: Gerhard Fleischer, 1817), on *Aj.* 852.

have recognised it as represented (if indeed it is) in Menelaus' speech, nor to have sympathised with the view of human relations to which he subscribes.

So far this discussion takes no account of the extent to which individuals subscribed to the dominant ideology of their city-state. Individual Greeks from other cities at a performance in Athens may have been more (or less) in favour of democracy than the majority of their fellow-countrymen; moreover, in a non-democratic state, the dominant ideology need not have been the most popular one. Within Athens itself there were conflicts of opinion too, of course. Yet aristocrats and oligarchs are likely to have been no better disposed to Menelaus than democrats were; since although Menelaus calls Ajax a mere *δημότης*, this is a prejudicial designation that does not correspond to the fact that Ajax was a self-sufficient ruler in his own right who owed no more than general allegiance to the Greek cause, and certainly not unquestioning obedience to the sons of Atreus. This very point is made by Teucer in his reply, and should give us pause before we conclude that Menelaus' words are meant to rouse specifically democratic passions in the audience. Athenian democrats would no doubt have taken against Menelaus; but Sophocles has so constructed the scene that a far wider cross-section of his audience is likely to have experienced the same feeling. Analysing the reaction of one part of that audience, even the largest part, will leave us with an incomplete picture of what Sophocles was trying to achieve.

A further question relevant to this context is that of reperformance.<sup>7</sup> Scholars often focus their attention wholly on the first performance of any given tragedy, and

---

<sup>7</sup> For this topic see P. J. Finglass, 'Ancient reperformances of Sophocles', in A. A. Lamari (ed.), *Reperformances of Drama in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries BC. Authors and Contexts*. Trends in

there are good reasons for doing so: this is the one which the playwright himself usually directed, and which can be imagined as having corresponded most nearly to his intentions. But tragedies were being reperformed already during the fifth century, well before reperformance became an established feature of the Dionysia in 386, and it is fair to imagine that playwrights were at least aware of the possibility that their dramas could be performed more than once, quite possibly in different locations. As a consequence, we may infer that playwrights at least sometimes designed their works with future performances in mind, knowing that these performances would take place before different Greek audiences; the playwright's fame, both in the present and the future, would in part depend on it. We do not have to call tragedy a wholly panhellenic artform to admit that it was far from Athenocentric, and our analyses of tragedy must recognise that diversity both in its audiences and in its performances.<sup>8</sup>

Emphasising such diversity lies at the heart of a recent study of tragedy and politics by William Allan and Adrian Kelly.<sup>9</sup> Their conclusion, that 'the polyphony of the Athenian audience, and the ways in which it is managed in societal terms, are mirrored in the polyphony of the drama' (p. 95) can be welcomed; so too can their view that 'no Attic tragedy could afford to be exclusively pro- or anti-democratic, or

---

Classics 7/2. (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), pp. 207–23, and the whole edited collection that is Lamari, *Reperformances*.

<sup>8</sup> For this subject see E. Stewart, *Greek Tragedy on the Move. The Birth of a Panhellenic Art Form c. 500–300 BC* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> W. Allan and A. Kelly, 'Listening to many voices: Athenian tragedy as popular art', in A. Marmodoro and J. Hills (eds.), *The Author's Voice in Classical and Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 77–122. A subsequent relevant article by one of these authors, A. Kelly, 'Aias in Athens: the worlds of the play and the audience', *QUCC*, NS 111 (2015), pp. 61–92, appeared (in 2016) too late for me to take into account in this piece, which I completed in early 2015.

indeed pro- or anti-aristocratic, for the simple reason that its audience was not so exclusively either' (p. 92), or that 'the tragedian would have been unwise to portray Ajax or any other aristocratic hero in a negative light simply for standing out from the crowd, since the plays were largely funded by aristocrats who as *choregoi* competed against one another to be the best' (p. 94). They are less interested in the non-Athenian element among the spectators, and do not explicitly raise the question of the gender composition of the audience (though see below); but they are keenly aware of the diversity of opinions likely to have been found among the Athenian males who form the subject of their inquiry. If I question some of their claims below, I do so from a perspective of broad sympathy with their conclusions.

Avoiding the extremes (as they perceive them) of those who regard tragedy largely in aesthetic, universalising terms, and those who see in it a constant questioning of the values of the society from which it sprang, Allan and Kelly examine several relevant plays 'to show how each appeals to as wide a swathe of the public as possible in the hope, inter alia, of winning first prize' (p. 80). They are rightly sceptical of those who claim that tragedy is essentially a subversive genre; they rightly note that when tragedy questions the values of Athenian society, that does not necessarily mean that tragedy is calling the values of Athenian society into question (p. 85). But we may wonder just how Athenian some of these values actually are.

One of the plays that they pay particular attention to is Sophocles' *Ajax*.<sup>10</sup> In their view, 'Ajax embodies a potent fantasy of masculinity: a strong, brave,

---

<sup>10</sup> Allan and Kelly 'Listening', pp. 93–5. Their quotation of my discussion, 'Ajax mentions the *polis* twice' (p. 81 n. 15), is misleadingly inaccurate, since the character Ajax mentions the *polis* only once.

honourable, and decisive warrior, who has appeal for all Athenians, not just the aristocratic elite' (p. 93). This statement needs unpacking. Undoubtedly Ajax was strong, and a warrior; and not even his enemies would say that he was indecisive. The other adjectives are more debatable. The terms brave and honourable might better be applied to Tecmessa, Odysseus, or even Teucer, than to Ajax. The audience learns almost at the start of the play that Ajax has attempted to kill the Greek army as they slept, setting out at night so as to conceal his mission: the antithesis of bravery and honour. Moreover, Ajax's deliberate deception of Tecmessa and his men into thinking that he had changed his mind and was not going to kill himself might well be viewed as dishonourable too. That is not to say that Ajax is simply an unsympathetic character; Sophocles to an extent rehabilitates him during the second part of the play, and even before then he displays admirable characteristics.<sup>11</sup> But Allan and Kelly apply these adjectives to Ajax without fully considering how far Ajax falls short of meriting such an assessment. They later show that they are aware of the negative side of Ajax's portrayal, remarking 'Ajax abandons his family and his men, despite their desperate pleading . . . , so while he may be thought great in some respects, an Athenian would surely hope that his *philoï* and *strategoi* will be more mindful of their duties and responsibilities' (p. 96). True; but so would a Spartan, or a Sicyonian, or a Syracusan. Similarly, their argument that 'the tragedians deploy their heroes democratically, adapting the heroic past so as to appeal to as many Athenians as

---

The words in my edition actually read '*Ajax* mentions the πόλις twice' (Finglass, *Ajax*, p. 57); that is, there are two mentions of the polis in the play, *Ajax*.

<sup>11</sup> See Finglass, *Ajax*, pp. 51–3 and P. J. Finglass, '*Ajax*', in A. Markantonatos (ed.), *Brill's Companion to Sophocles* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), pp. 59–72.

possible' (p. 93) neglects how non-Athenians may equally have found something to admire in the figures put before them by the dramatists.

Moreover, the claim that a 'potent fantasy of masculinity' would have appealed to 'all Athenians' needs examination. What about female Athenians? Was this 'potent fantasy' as attractive to them? How could we tell? This point at least needs to be argued, since our evidence for the feelings of women in classical Athens is vastly less than in the case of men; if we had reason to believe that Athenian men and women would have responded in the same way to a figure like Ajax, and had the same attitudes to masculinity (however defined), that would deserve to be highlighted. Yet although Allan and Kelly are sensitive to diversity in terms of social class and political outlook among the Athenians in the audience, they overlook gender entirely. We may wonder whether the type of extreme masculinity, involving among other things the murder of one's sleeping comrades, would have appealed to women to the same degree as it did to men – or rather, whether many women found it even less appealing than men did.

Perhaps Allan and Kelly do not raise this issue because they believe that there were no women in the audience; but they do not say as much, and indeed the evidence against that hypothesis seems overwhelming. Several passages in comedy and Plato imply, or state outright, that women were present;<sup>12</sup> the often-repeated modern claim that they were not appears motivated not by any evidence to that effect, but by an *a priori* assumption that since tragedy was political, and since women were excluded from political activities in ancient Athens, they could not have been present at tragic performances. The problem with this type of reasoning should be self-evident. There

---

<sup>12</sup> See E. Csapo and W. J. Slater, *The Context of Ancient Drama* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 286–7; further discussion in Roselli, *Theater*, pp. 158–94.

might well not have been as many women as men in the audience – I would guess that men outnumbered women by a considerable margin – but again, just because a particular group is a minority does not mean that we as scholars are entitled to ignore it.

Allan and Kelly go on to contrast Pindar's treatment of the myth, which focuses on how deceptive talk by Odysseus dooms Ajax. That version is known to Sophocles, and alluded to several times; 'yet', as they go on to note, 'in the play Odysseus' skill at speaking and persuasion – that most Athenian of virtues – is the *only thing* that achieves Ajax's burial. In other words, what for Pindar is the dangerous facility which can overshadow true heroic greatness becomes, for Sophocles, the very thing required to achieve and confirm that greatness' (p. 94, their italics). The irony that for all the criticism earlier in the play of lying words, especially those delivered by Odysseus, Ajax's burial is nevertheless secured not through violence but by persuasion, is indeed noteworthy. But whether skill in speaking and persuasion can properly be designated 'that most Athenian of virtues' is another question.

The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are full of powerful and effective speeches, yet specifically Athenian characters there play almost no part – and these epics, with their powerful rhetoric and emphasis on heroism as a combination of words and actions,<sup>13</sup> formed a cornerstone of classical education and culture. The histories of Herodotus and Thucydides show that non-Athenian Greeks were more than capable of producing effective speeches; we may also remember that it was the rhetorician Gorgias of Leontini in Sicily who caused a sensation when he arrived in Athens in 427. In short, not only were effective speech and persuasion no Athenian monopoly, but the

---

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Hom. *Il.* 9.443 *μύθων τε ῥητῆρ' ἔμεναι πρηνεστῆρά τε ἔργων.*

Athenians themselves would have been well aware of that fact; as a result, they would not have regarded Odysseus' intervention as anything specifically Athenian, or indeed democratic. After all, Odysseus is speaking not before an assembly, but a single ruler, who gives way in the end because of his personal friendship with the speaker rather than thanks to the force of his rhetoric. At least in this exchange, we are in the world of aristocratic relationships rather than anything specifically to do with democracy or Athens itself.

Calling things 'Athenian' when they relate to a wider frame of reference can impede our understanding of what is going on in the plays. But the word 'political' is problematic too. So Allan and Kelly accuse Jasper Griffin of 'a failure to see that no form of public art, let alone one performed before a mass audience, can avoid being "political", not merely in the general sense "that it is concerned with human beings in a *polis*", but also because the Athenians themselves construed the "political" broadly and did not separate politics from other aspects of life' (pp. 81–2). That may be true up to a point; but when 'politics' becomes such a capacious term, its explicative value diminishes considerably. If any form of public art can be defined as political, then assigning such a label scarcely helps us to understand it; and in future discussions we will need more discriminating terms than that worn-out word to illustrate precisely what we mean.

Allan and Kelly are fundamentally right to see in tragedy a range of competing voices that would have appealed in different measures to different groups and individuals within an audience. But that polyphony, I would argue, is intended not just to appeal to different segments among male Athenian spectators, but reflects the much more diverse group (diverse in terms of both gender and ethnic identity) that, year on year, had the privilege of watching these masterpieces. If we are fully to



understand the audiences of classical tragedy and the impact that playwrights hoped to have on them, we must learn to appreciate that diversity – to learn, that is, to see beyond Athenian men.

P. J. Finglass is Professor of Greek and Head of the Department of Classics at the University of Nottingham, and a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford. He has published editions of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (2017), *Ajax* (2011), and *Electra* (2007), of Stesichorus (2014), and of Pindar's *Pythian Eleven* (2007), with Cambridge University Press.